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# MILTON AND THE PURITANS

BY R. SCOTT STEVENSON

THE tercentenary of the Pilgrim Fathers, recently celebrated, is suggestive of the great conflict for civil and religious liberty, which had waxed warm from the days of "Bloody Mary" and Elizabeth, and in John Milton's day became a real battle. Thirty years after the landing of the Pilgrims, Milton armed himself to champion this cause of liberty for the common people, so vital to the Puritan. Had Milton lived forty years earlier, he might have been a Pilgrim. As the Pilgrim needed a New World in which to live and work, so in later years the Old World needed Milton to muster and guide the forces of justice and truth in the mighty struggle.

The greatest period in English literature, opening with the publication of Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* in 1579, ended in the heroic sweep of the blind poet in his *Samson Agonistes*—a century of noble song, whose harp-strings vibrate still. From this high course of thought and imagination, descending like a fresh, invigorating mountain stream, the poets and literary men and women of succeeding generations drank deeply and freely.

"England," says the historian Green, "became the people of a book, and that book the Bible." How that Book should be interpreted in relation to the practical problems of Church and State, was the question that formed the line of contention. On one side, the State Church and the King, supported by the learning of the time; on the other, free religion and the Parliament, supported by English Puritanism. Even in the glorious reign of Elizabeth there were "petty subterfuges", and then, as now, the human heart was deceitful. James I came to the throne as a man comes to his private property, and his personal interests and selfish inclinations were supreme. The statesmen of Europe looked with astonishment on his childish sport in the affairs of a mighty people. The claim to divine right, so conspicuous and

bold in the "spacious times" of the great queen, began to yield to the more reasonable right of the people to dictate measures for their safety and comfort. This great change found its centre and motive in the Puritanism that so remarkably affected the life and work of Milton.

In the home of the poet's childhood, any "Queen Elizabeth gentleman" was cordially welcomed. His father had celebrated, in verse, the name and fame of that peerless Oriana, and had produced other poetical and musical compositions which made no small impression on the plastic soul of the son. Three characteristics, at least, were the inheritance of the youth, John: musical genius, predisposition to weakness of eyes, and Protestant faith, for which his father was disinherited; and we must not forget the sweet gentleness and charity ascribed to his mother. His education, culture and aspirations all seemed to place him in company with those who afterwards stood so loyally for the King. He visited foreign lands, and was received with great respect by cardinals and nobles, and was honored and praised by men of rank. A Latin poet at Rome, like Dryden in later years, exalted him above Homer, Virgil and Tasso. But, as Milton meekly confesses, it was a custom then and there to indulge in "flattery and fustian", and in turn his own compliments were sweetened to the taste of his gallant and hospitable friends in those queen cities of Florence, Rome and Naples, Venice, Geneva and Paris.

He visited the famous Galileo, who had grown old, and was then a "prisoner to the Inquisition for thinking in Astronomy otherwise than the Franciscan and Dominican licensers thought." And here Milton's soul must have flamed with indignation at such bigotry and tyranny over the natural rights and freedom of his fellow creatures. His convictions and purposes were rapidly forming. While in Naples, planning to visit Sicily and Greece, news came to him of civil strife in England, and he turned his face homeward, thinking it "base to be traveling abroad for his pleasure" while "his countrymen were contending for their liberty at home". In the struggle that followed, he adopted the pen as mightier than the sword. He "would not be wanting to his country, church and fellow-citizens in a crisis of so much

danger". By books, pamphlets and poems, he hurled the missiles of his burning convictions like bombs into the camp of the enemy.

In *L'Allegro*, a poem written when youth was merging in manhood, he touched on the lighter phases and traditions of Merry England; and as yet there was no unmistakable evidence that the Milton of those early fancies and songs was to become the mouth-piece of Puritanism. The transition gradually assumed form and character as the cause of the Puritan broadened and deepened from the times of Elizabeth. This movement toward the triumphs of civil and religious toleration was as rapid as it could be not to produce confusion and disaster in its path. Elizabeth dreaded the privilege of private judgment. It was the opening of the flood-gates of anarchy—this sacred liberty of the people—and she would prevent all church privilege and exemption, in view of the welfare of the nation.

The controversy waxed warm. The selfish reigns of James and Charles did not lend the charm of peace. And when Milton's poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* were published, Puritanism had become an emphatic protest against the tyranny of the King's party, and though the struggle had reached but its first stages, to a thoughtful and tender spirit like that of Milton, the outcome was not far distant, and of no small moment. The three poems, *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso* and *Comus* were not written simply for pastime, or the playful indulgence of poetic fancy. They are adorned with classic and traditional lore, but the current of meaning runs deep, and is revealed as the thought and purpose of the man's soul are revealed in the intimate relationships of his mental transition. Honestly and fairly he measured the claims of each contending force. His soul burned within him and his hand trembled under the mighty influence of his convictions, while he penned his poetic versions of the times.

Standing alone *L'Allegro* would be but poorly understood, and not of considerable purpose. Associated with *Il Penseroso* and *Comus*, the profligate ease and pleasure pictured in *L'Allegro*, and the "scorned delights" and serious devotion described in *Il Penseroso*, point clearly in *Comus* to the poet armed with Puritan armor. Mirth, ease, superficial elegance, are on the one side;

somber reflection, devotion to books and the sterner relations of life in Church and State, on the other. These opposing elements, conditions and influences are the very soul of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. And when Milton had seen and felt more of the outer world, its joys and sorrows, and had studied more carefully the tendency in social and political spheres, he was ready to tell their story and point their peril in his *Comus* and *Lycidas*. In these poems he pictures the debauchery and open sin in court and prelate. And these pictures are not too strongly colored.

The poets favored at court, and indeed the mouth-piece of the King, wrote what their constituencies demanded, moving in highest strains on the floods of flattery and falsehood. Milton was not a favorite at court. He did not desire to be. He stood on the battlement, a hero for the truth.

If Mirth can give what she promises in *L'Allegro*, he will abide with Mirth; if Melancholy can give what she promises in *Il Penseroso*, of pleasures and sweetness, he will abide with Melancholy. In *Comus* he discovers and proclaims the "glozing lies" of *L'Allegro's* mirth, seen and verified in the brilliant display of Royalists, who seemed utterly void of honor, and gloried in their shame. They boasted of refinements, but these were transported from France and Italy, by the son of Bacchus and Circe, the wine and sloth of a degenerate age. These were the guises thrown over the perils to which the youth of the land were exposed. The light fantastic spirit of *L'Allegro* would conduct them with bowed heads to receive the crown of stolen gems from unholy hands.

In *Comus* are the wandering notes from the song of levity, and the poet rather praises than scorns the pleasures that are humble and holy, and all that is true to Nature, as she stands without pollution or stain before the immaculate Presence, and exalts them as the inheritance of the good and wise. In this mask of *Comus*, also, the poet lifts the veil from the profligate court of Charles. The gorgeous extravagance of the palace of *Comus* is but a dim picture of the wanton practices in the palace of the King. It is written in history that Charles expended for jewelry alone 30,000 pounds in eighteen months. And the immorality and wild luxury of the court of the King were equalled, if not out-done, by the brilliant ritual and wicked practices of the court of

the prelate. Thus the Church sat, like the lady in the enchanted chair, "in stony fetters, fixt and motionless".

But as there were seven thousand in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal, so there were many Puritans in England who aspired

To lay their just hands on the golden key  
That opes the palace of eternity.

These, Milton would arouse. He urged them to lay hands on the sorcerer. And this they did, but they failed to seize the wand and bind the enchanter, and the poet points again to the Church still in chains and distressed, and pleads with them to employ Purity to complete the task. And yet there is danger:

Lest the sorcerer entice  
With some other new device.

He hastens to the conclusion, resting his confidence on Virtue:

She alone is free;  
She can teach ye how to climb  
Higher than the sphery clime;  
Or if Virtue feeble were,  
Heav'n itself would stoop to her.

After a brief silence the poet comes forth again, piping his soul's lament in the sadder strains of his *Lycidas*, celebrating the virtues of Edward King, a learned friend of Cambridge days, as in later years Lord Tennyson trailed his darker plumage in the depths of a sea of woe. And like the modern poet, the private anguish of his soul bore with it a prophecy of England's coming grief, sounding in trumpet-tones the doom of the King's tyranny and of the bigotry of prelate-cloister. In *Lycidas* we reach the open door of a new transition, through which the poet goes forth into a new day of toil and triumph. The meadow-streams of his beloved haunts he has left forever. His life has fallen on "evil days". Now his whole strength is thrown into the struggle for liberty, for which he so ardently pleaded in his poems. He smites with his Damascus blade the Gordian knot that held in its folds the freedom of mind and conscience, the right of free speech, and the power of a free press.

The Puritans, of whom Milton was the avowed champion, were

neither vagabonds nor fools. They were patriots. Macaulay said they were a "most remarkable body of men—no vulgar fanatics". Their peculiar faith saved them from the terror of death, and they grew stern and harsh, ignoring the charm of pleasure—the King's court had perverted and degraded pleasure. Their manners in many respects were absurd and foolish. And we may not wonder at this, for they were an ignorant people, rising with what tact they had in defense of the grandest principles for which a people ever fought. Green says that the temper of the Puritan was intolerant "of the lawlessness and disorder of a personal tyranny"; that it "was no temper of mere revolt". The Puritan resisted, not because of "any disdain of kingly authority", but because of "his devotion to an authority higher and more sacred than that of kings". He fought for civil liberty principally because civil liberty involved much that is vital to religion. The Royalists were more charming and elegant in manner, but their cause was that of bigotry and tyranny.

Milton stood between the Royalists and the Puritans. He was a moral and religious eclectic. He was the survival and embodiment of the fittest, drawing to himself from both sides all that was good and great. He hated the wild manners and delusions of the Puritans, he had no patience with their ridicule of science and pleasure. He was like them in that he kept himself always "in his great Taskmaster's eye". Hence he had within him the secret-power of their heroism. On the other hand, while Milton hated the tyranny of the Royalists, he adorned himself with all that was truly admirable in them.

The great and heroic work, the glory of which is attributable to Milton alone, is his valiant charge for freedom of the mind, liberty of the press, and the expansion and development of moral principles. Perhaps the most conspicuous monument of these labors is the *Areopagitica* which has been pronounced "the most splendid argument, perhaps, the world had then witnessed in behalf of intellectual liberty".

As the second period of Milton's life and work thus ends in darkness and glory, we see England entering the dawn of her modern day of greatness. And, too, in this transition, a reaction occurs, vicious and dark. The fittest of Puritanism is ruthlessly

swept aside. Godliness is flouted and scorned. "Duelling and raking become the marks of a fine gentleman," says Green, "and grave men winked at the follies of 'honest fellows' who ended a day of debauchery by a night in the gutter." In this fearful and disastrous clash, after his heroic struggles with his pen for civil and religious liberty, and as Latin Secretary under Cromwell, Milton naturally fell into the clutches of the Royalists. They hated him with unmitigated hatred for many things, and particularly because his prodigious quill of 1650, in the *Defense of the English People*, told all Europe that the execution of Charles I was justifiable. The hangman burned his book, and he was cast into prison. When he was set at liberty, his head was bowed under the rage of a blinded populace. He suffered the loss of property by bankruptcy and fire, and in his old age and poverty he was compelled to exchange his library for bread and home.

In the twelfth book of the *Paradise Lost* the poet rebukes those who had welcomed the return of the Stuarts to power. He censures them for yielding to the baseness within them, which which naturally resulted in the tyranny over them. There were those who had fought bravely in the cause to which he had sacrificed his talents and his life, and as a monument to their heroic efforts he wrote *Samson Agonistes*.

As a poet and statesman, says Macaulay, Milton was "the glory of English literature, the champion and the martyr of English liberty". He lived in an age of exalted privileges in culture and learning, and without restraint exhausted every available means in the improvement of his superior talents, and yet perhaps no man of genius ever toiled against greater odds than he. It is a safe criterion, that a great poem, produced in the midst of advanced and refined conditions of life and thought, is itself the evidence of remarkable genius. In the rude beginnings of any nation, when the forest wears its undisturbed beauty, and beast and bird and flower are supreme, the poet sings most easily and sweetly. The England of Milton's day demanded that men philosophize, analyze and build. This is not the poet's business. And yet Milton served his generation well. He philosophized, analyzed and builded, and withal was one of the truest poets the world has known.



If we cannot fully approve the doctrines of the Puritan, if we cannot justify some of his peculiar practices, if we cannot glorify Milton for everything he said and did, we may at least reflect with gratitude and praise that, without the Puritan, England would have sunk to the level of France and Spain, which was alarmingly low in Milton's day; and without Milton, Puritanism would have been misjudged, and perhaps effectually persecuted and subdued before its work was done. Without Milton, the glory of free speech and a free press would have remained befogged by the ignorance and tyranny of many years.

This, our age of liberty and peace—and war—is indebted to the heroic fortitude and superior wisdom of Milton, who, in the midst of grave reverses, poured forth the convictions and the music of his soul in the pæans of conflict and in the anthems of victory. And with all his faults, to say that he was great, is like saying that the sun is glorious, or that the rose is beautiful.

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